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ABSTRACT

The development of school culture within a comprehensive school in northern England, Deangate School, is examined in this case study, with a focus on the process of self-definition. Two aspects of school culture emerged as significant to the process of "becoming": generic culture, that which is common across secondary schools; and unique culture, that quality that differentiates between schools. The development of school culture through the evolutionary interaction between generic and unique culture is described. Conclusions are that both kinds of culture are resistant to change and that primary definers play a key role in shaping unique culture. A cultural map is proposed on the basis of degree of overlap between "negative" and "positive" space. One figure depicts the stages of becoming. (LMI)

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Paper Presented at the 1992 Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

# Becoming a School and the Development of School Culture

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# Becoming a School and the Development of School Culture

Schools are a particular kind of institution. For more than two decades ethnographic research has taken as problematic only certain segments of school and schooling, little of which has concerned itself with school effectiveness or improvement. This paper considers the case of a newly formed English Comprehensive School and examines how it went about defining itself. Two aspects of school emerged as significant to the process of 'becoming': generic culture, that which is common across secondary schools; and unique culture, that quality which helps us differentiate between schools. The latter may be compared to Effective Schools' and School Improvements' use of 'ethos' (Rutter) or 'climate' (Mortimore). The report describes the development of school culture through the evolutionary relationship between generic and unique culture.

For some considerable time school culture has been identified as contributing in some way to school effectiveness and improvement. However, too little is known about what constitutes school culture - how it is formed, how it is changed - and too many assumptions form a significant body of rhetoric of school effectiveness and improvement research.

This paper reports on the study of Deangate School, a newly formed comprehensive school in the North of England and examines how it went about defining itself. An objective of the study was to built up a picture of how a school establishes its culture and Deangate School, going about the process of becoming a school, provided an excellent vehicle.

I will begin by describing a feature of the process of becoming a school as experienced by Deangate. Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of staff-hierarchy unity/disunity against time and is and indicator of socio-emotional reaction of teachers to the trauma of becoming a school. In Deangate's case, we can see that the evolutionary process began with a high degree of equanimity building to a period of disunity, followed by a period of lesser disunity. The data suggests that staff initially focused on establishing positive social networks and agreement on rules, regulations, rituals and organisational structures. The atmosphere of collegiality continued when the school opened with what Sarason (1982) has called 'house-keeping' matters, which are particular to the birth of a new school. A series of major disagreements or 'critical events' marked the end of the 'honeymoon' period and signalled the beginning of the second phase. 'Critical events' were

EA 024 016

differences of interpretation of rules, regulations and organisational structures between major factions in the school and acted as 'benchmarks' against which future policy decisions were made. A third phase followed and although 'critical events' continued to take place they were less significant and participants appeared increasingly to accept the 'benchmarks' and character the school had taken on - the mould was set.

An analysis of process and content elements of stages 1 and 2 suggest that Deangate established two subcultures, generic and unique culture, within 18 months of opening its doors. Generic Culture, established during stage 1, formed the basic building blocks of the institution and represented, for example, by rules, rituals, traditions, roles, status, structures and physical environment. Deangate's generic culture, which was mostly taken-for-granted by participants, served to differentiate the school from other institutions for example a hospital, a prison or a bank. Deangate's unique culture, on the other hand, gave the school its unique character and served to differentiate it from other schools. An indication of the nature of the two sub-cultures is given by their status and role in the process of becoming a school. From Figure 1 we can see that generic culture is established first and takes priority over unique culture which comes later.

The nature of, and the relationship between, generic and unique culture is interesting and worthy of consideration. Here, I will reflect on a typical 'critical event', in this case concerning Speech Day which took place towards the end of the School's first year, in order to explore this issue. Speech Day or Prize Giving, or something very similar, takes place in the majority of English secondary schools and is an integral part of the generic culture of school. This event took place at Deangate once a year and data was collected data on three occasions. The twelve month gap between Speech Days, during which the school developed and evolved, meant the event became a 'thermometer of evolution'.

The 'new' school was an amalgamation of two secondary modern schools and a grammar school. The site of the 'new' school was the old grammar school. Speech Day, like many of Deangate's overt traditions was based on the old Grammar School tradition. This is not surprising since the 'new' Headteacher was a past pupil, teacher and Deputy Head of the old Grammar School and knew the event intimately. Speech Day was organised by three people, all of whom were past members of the Grammar School. The Deputy Head was instructed by the Head to make the occasion "as its always been". The Head enjoyed ceremonial occasions and believed implicitly that certain traditions of the 'old school' should be maintained. He did not discuss with staff the format of the new school's first Speech Day, or involve them in its organisation. He took it for granted that Speech Day would follow the familiar (to him) pattern of past years. Only a small section of the

school community were present - the prize winners and their parents. Only eleven of the staff of thirty eight accepted his invitation, and many of those did so out of a sense of duty. A senior member of staff commented:

> The Speech Day was the same as it was in Grammar School days. The Head, Steve and Mary knew what they were doing, but they were the only ones. The staff didn't really feel involved but then all they knew about Speech Day was a notice on the staff notice board and an invitation. There were no moves to get them involved or tell them what it was about, again the assumption that we know. We want our own Speech Day not the remnants of the old Grammar school.

The school's second and third Speech Day were slightly different because staff asserted their opinions and pressed for changes. The Head took account of their concerns and agreed to make amendments. In reality the third Speech Day looked very similar to the first since the Grammar School format prevailed with minor innovations and additions to satisfy the staff, who placated, attended in larger numbers. The actions of the Headteacher were unusual considering that since day one he had espoused the importance of democracy and of a democratic institution. This suggests that he unconsciously replaced one set of values with another. What the Head had practised was a form of Husserl's 'bracketing' - that is putting to one side or 'bracketing out' one set of values in order to concentrate on the task in hand - in this case a preferred value. It is clear that a priority of values operated at Deangate delineating generic and unique culture and setting up presidents within those cultures.

This, and other 'critical events', acted as a benchmark for school participants in two ways: firstly it gave off a content message which said 'this is the format of this particular event in the future', and secondly it gave off a process message which said 'some decisions may be made democratically and some are not and this particular aspect of the school is not'.

What does this tell us about the nature of, and the relationship between, generic and unique culture? The Head and staff, although disagreeing on the format of Speech Day, did not question its existence. Both parties assumed the tradition would continue in one form or another. Also it is noticeable that the Head's role as leader and decision maker are taken for granted. Why is this the case? One explanation is that Speech Day and the Head's role are aspects of generic culture and represent participants basic need for security and stability. To question the status quo would be to undermine that stability. Thus, for participants,

the 'first protocol' was always operative, that is, differences may be aired but not to the extent that generic culture is damaged or destabilised, reinforcing the point made earlier concerning value priority separating the two sub-cultures. This would explain why generic culture was established first and remained unquestioned despite major differences and disagreements. Generic culture could be said to be the prime normative value of all participants. Secondary values only came to the for when individual or group interpretations manifested themselves during the establishment of the school's unique culture.

Now I want to briefly focus on the development of Deangate's unique culture, using the example of Speech Day to explore some of the character forming concepts emerging out of the study of the School. The first is not a concept merely a feature already well known to school improvement researchers - that both sub-cultures are difficult to change. We have already seen from the Speech Day example that institutional history and personal biographies are key factors in determining generic and unique culture. Data collected over a three year period suggests that generic culture was pervasive and in place prior to the School's opening and that Deangate's unique culture was established very soon after the School opened. Berger (1963) makes the point that generic culture, once established, is resistant to change:

> . . . each social situation in which we find ourselves is not only defined by our contemporaries but predefined by our predecessors. Since one cannot possibly talk back to one's ancestors, their ill conceived constructions are commonly more difficult to get rid of than those built in our own lifetime.
>
> (Page 101)

The act of becoming a school is, in the main, a process of affirmation. The sub-cultures are, by their natures, stable (in the same way that in the human body each cell is said to be replaced every seven years, yet the whole remains recognizably the same) but organic and therefore manifest traits of dynamic and continuous change. However, we can say that once a cultural president has been set it is difficult to change especially in a predetermined direction, although the British experience suggests that changes in the wider culture (for example Government involvement) may lead to changes in Generic culture.

The second concept to emerge from the Deangate study was that of primary definers of a school's culture. Some participants, some groups, some structures, are more influential than others. Whilst this may vary from school to school there were indications from Deangate that certain common denominators or features exist which are pointers to the identification of some primary definers. A clue, for example, to some

primary definers is give by generic culture - in English schools the Headteacher is very influential, both as a manager and a leader and wields considerable power and this is taken for granted by participants. In addition, the parameters of the Head's activity is known to the staff as Becker(1965) points out:

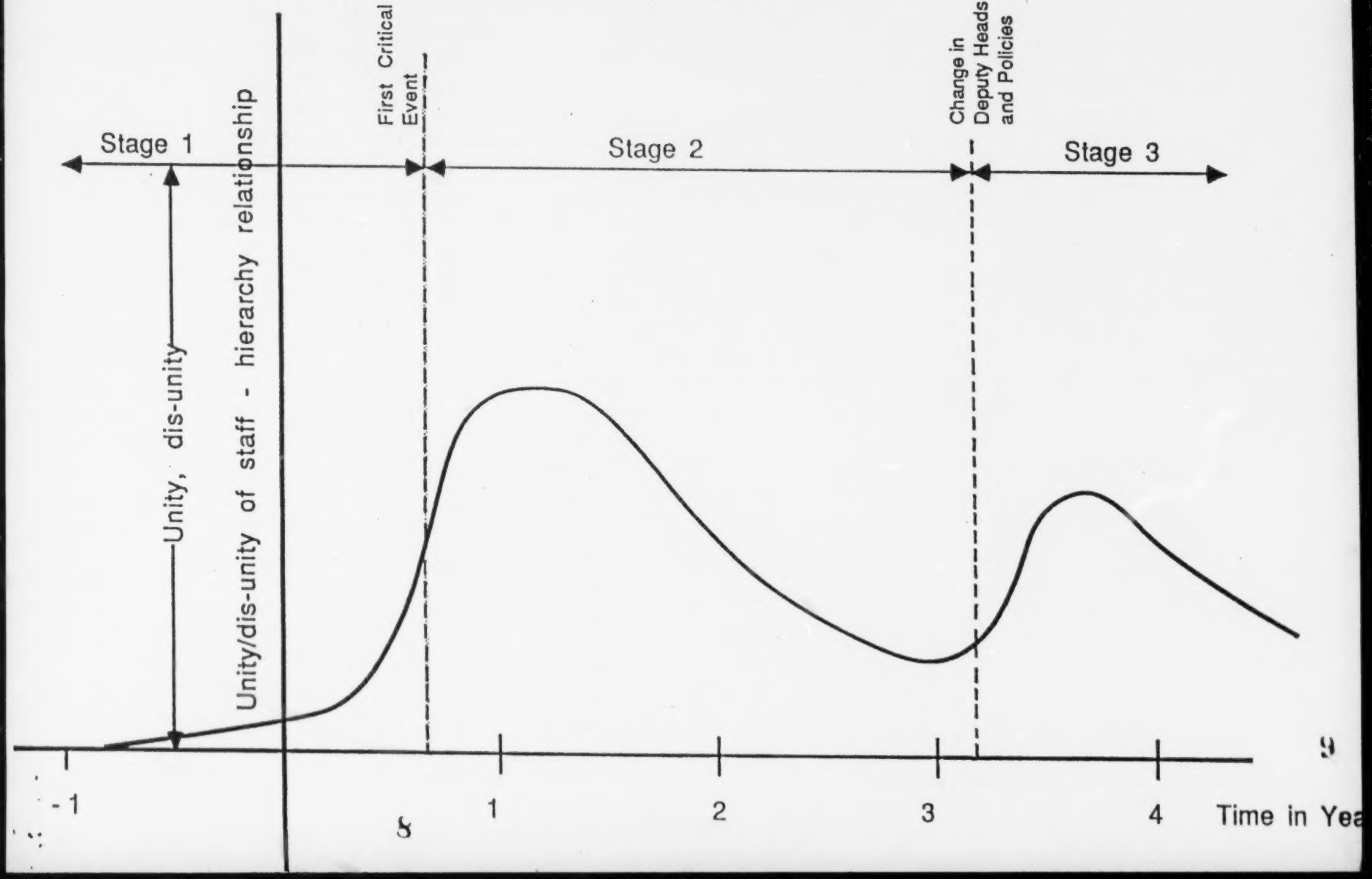
> Teachers have a well developed conception of just how and towards what end the principal's authority should be used...

At Deangate, as the Speech Day example illustrates, the Headteacher emphasised some aspects of school and ignored others, and this held true for all primary definers in the school. It was possible to map out a primary definer's sphere of influence by identifying the 'vector quality', that is the force and direction with which decisions and actions are made. The Head of Deangate, for example, emphasised and celebrated humour, ceremony and public relations, but ignored what happened in the classrooms. Significant definers of unique schooling, the head of languages and the head of science, promoted and achieved high academic standards in their departments while other departments achieved less in terms of good exam results. As one would expect, where 'vector quality' of primary and significant definers overlapped unique culture was strongest. Where they did not overlap, where there were differing interpretation or disagreement, unique culture was open to manipulation by serendipital factors.

The above point leads us to consider the possibility of a cultural map which is drawn by using an approach used in fine art - that of positive and negative space. Artists, in sketching out objects on a canvas, consider not only the positive space occupied by objects but also the space they do not occupy - the negative space. The influence of generic culture, individual and group 'vector quality' and their degree of overlap, and the effect of defined structures, all contribute to a school's 'positive space'. The influence of different interpretation of participants to generic culture, where serendipity was prevalent, contributed to the 'negative space'. The combination of positive and negative space provides a profile of a school's generic culture.

Only a brief outline of the process of a school becoming a school has been possible here. Observing a school defining itself gives an indication of participants' priorities in terms of structures and needs. It also sensitises us to the significance of generic and unique culture and how they in turn act to determine the nature and character of schools and schooling. The identification and exploration of key concepts of school culture, how that culture is evolved, what factors contribute to it, and how it is changed, remains a priority for school effectiveness and improvement research.

Figure 1 The Stages of Becoming



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